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Factors affecting quality of service in schools in Hualien, Taiwan

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Abstract

The current trend in education is to provide high quality “services” to meet the demands of students seen as “clients” or customers. In Taiwan elementary schools are facing problems in effectively surviving in this climate. The quality of school services has to be enhanced continually in order to remain competitive. The aim is to find what factors are important for teachers trying to meet these new demands. We conducted interviews with front line education staff in schools in Hualien County. The results indicated that factors chiefly affecting quality of service were: government policy; school administration; teaching equipment and the ethos of the school; leadership and management; social change; globalization.

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1. Introduction

During the 21st century there has been rapid growth of information exchange globally, and one of the consequences in education has been the principle of answering the demands of students seen as customers (Cheng 2005; Hon 2004). In Taiwan it is popularly thought that ‘to be a scholar is to be in the upper class of society’. The ‘elite’ school is dominant in the minds of parents. If a student’s lesson performance and exam results are good, he may be admitted to the best ‘elite’ school. It is generally that proportion of students who enter schools of a high grade that receive high quality teaching. Nearly all school resources are focused on examination results, marginalising other dimensions of education (Chang & Yie 2006). The competition between schools in the provision of high academic results becomes the only criterion to satisfy parental expectations, and this leads to a special and limited school culture. There is no doubt that schools should maintain the ability to educate students both in the realm of ideas and in the ability to deal with them. But the educational climate is changing in this way with changes in domestic and international environments (Pan 2004).

Statistical data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (2012) showed that the birth rate has declined every year. Because of this declining birth rate affecting especially our locality, many schools cannot recruit enough students, and this influences the viability of the school, and may lead to its closure. The ‘service quality’ of the school is

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watched more and more closely by everybody (Hon 2004; Kotler 2003; Gronroos 1990). People will compete energetically to enter a school which has the best reputation among parents. Conversely a school with a reputation for poor service may expect a reduced number of students year by year, and may even be faced with closure. Thus clearly every school understands the importance of school service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry 1985).

This research inquires into which are the most salient factors leading to good and poor outcomes in provision of school services. We focus on Hualien County in Taiwan, because it is a good example of a region with a large territory and sparsely scattered population, causing difficulty in retaining students who may choose to leave the area. It also has more isolated small rural schools than other counties.

2. Literature review

Our investigation looks into all factors which may significantly influence the quality of service in small schools in the countryside.

2.1. Government policy

Government plans for changes in schools stipulate development of many detailed plans (Shu 2000). School business plans must be focused in a way to make these goals achievable. Chiu & Huang (2007) point out that the government should lighten the excessively stringent restrictions in the field of education, in terms of more freely allocated resources, liberalizing of content, less bureaucratic administration. This may give grounds for optimism to look forwards to a benign policy for education which encourages high quality teachers to enter and stay in the field, with increased respect and morale, in order for high quality teaching to prosper and develop. Lai (2006) speaks lightening excessive restrictions and make the point that the Ministry of Education needs to initiate a reform of the educational system. It should be established and confirmed that a precondition of promoting educational reform at this time is to minimize the excessive constraints that are currently hindering innovation in education in Taiwan.

2.2. School administration

In this era of a pluralistic society with multiple beliefs and goals, the modern school business committee needs to take into account the suggestions of parents, and parents should hold responsible posts within the different organizations of school management. Then parents begin to take part in school administration, which adds complexity and difficulties for the school to make its policy. When many different personnel and disciplines join the committee, then powers of decision are complicated and the powers of the school administration can gradually become weakened (Lai 2006). This causes teachers especially in remote small schools to experience a heavier workload. For example it is more difficult to find a short term replacement teacher to cover maternity leave. Teachers also are required to be responsible for the provision of school meals for pupils from low income families through the winter and summer vacations (Lin 2005).

2.3. Teaching equipment and the ethos of the school

The equipment at the school has a direct influence on teaching. Excellent up to date equipment can facilitate multiple teaching methods, and flexibility for students both in subjects and in methods of study (Cheng 2005; Gronroos 1984). Ensuring a lively positive atmosphere has a great influence on the work of personnel at the school. If colleagues were friendly and approachable, this was an encouragement to teachers, and will be immediately reflected in the behaviour and feelings of the students (Chang & Yie 2006; Cheng & Shu 2003).

The content of courses increases the variety and width of courses, this leads to difficulties in implementation. It is especially true when new courses are set up which are not within the teacher's speciality. For example: Education

in Defence, and Oceanology. In schools the importance of speaking English is recognised from primary school level (Lin 2004).

2.4. Leadership and management

The headmaster's job is a position under great pressure. Some headmasters although they should be running a school full time, actually spend most of their time with the education department or administration, or other business rather than teaching. Good leadership cultivates a spirit of cooperation and trust with clear system of rewards and penalties (Tong 2005). When there is not a teacher available to take a class, or the teacher's time is taken up handling administrative or other duties, teaching quality will certainly be influenced (Lai 2006).

2.5. Social changes

Taiwan is a country with the lowest birth rate in the world at present. Because of this low birth rate, many parents concentrate entirely on their only child's studies, and ignore other aspects of his upbringing and behaviour. This leads to difficulties in discipline at school and out of it, and parents are often held responsible and blamed. The slogan that 'the customer is always right' leads to a downgrading of the authority of the school (Cheng & Shu 2003; Cheng 2005).

The importance of family responsibility is not stressed sufficiently. Many parents are busy, and ignore the parental responsibility for inducing discipline and motivation. The government appears to have transferred this responsibility from parents onto the school teachers, which causes considerable unnecessary pressure for schoolteachers to bear (Cheng 2005; Shue 2004).

2.6. Globalization

The number of children with a non-national parent has rapidly increased. The statistical data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs show that at the end of 2012 the number of foreign spouses in Taiwan is 82,449. Having to deal with more parents and children of different nationalities, teachers must reflect on relationships between students and teachers. The portfolio and responsibilities of the school has to widen to incorporate protocols for dealing with children from foreign passport holders and marriages abroad, with appropriate education and guidance (Mo & Lai 2006; Cheng 2005).

3. Qualitative research method

We chose Hualien County as a case study and used focus group discussions. Hualien County is located at the eastern coast of Taiwan, which has high proportion of international marriages and more remote small scale schools than other counties. We applied convenience sampling and chose 12 senior teachers from six primary schools in this area. We held four meetings to discuss how teachers should best work towards a well deserved reputation for quality of service in schools. The focus group discussions have provided our research with an abundance of material to analyse and a variety of viewpoints to consider

4. Results and Reflection

4.1. Government Policy

Schools with small numbers of teachers found the policies more difficult to implement. All of the twelve teachers identified Government Policy as being a major influence. It was especially difficult for small scale schools

to implement government micromanagement policies. This was because of the small number of teachers, and the number of official forms each teacher had to complete to document implementation of so many aspects of policy.

The cramping bureaucratic regulations should be lifted from teachers allowing them more professional independence. Together with lifting of outmoded constraints on teachers, a less restrictive attitude is needed in regard to teaching materials. While mathematics and physics remain vital core subjects, they may not be appropriate for all, and wider scope of alternatives should also be reflected in books and teaching media offered. There is a need to provide appropriate education not only in the narrow subjects of the academically inclined students, but also for the majority of school children who need preparation for a respectable and rewarding occupation in the world beyond school. Therefore a wider range of options needs to be provided to reflect and accommodate the wide range of interests and needs of the majority of students.

4.2. School administration

Teachers should help to organise the necessary committees. They should account for at least a half of the membership of administrative committees. Ten out of the twelve teachers insisted this must be approached with caution. Because the teachers occupy the most important posts in the school, they should have the authority to make claims equal in weight to that of the administrators. Yet teachers should not be overloaded by having to do teaching and administrative duties concurrently.

4.3. Teaching equipment and the ethos of the school

All teachers agreed that modern teaching equipment was essential, especially computerised and interactive teaching facilities. Setting up English courses is correctly emphasised. However, in rural areas it is more difficult to recruit a specialized English teacher that is required, and to promote a course of English studies in the elementary schools. As to the ethos of the school, if someone was moody or overcritical, or tended to micromanage their activities without trusting them at ground level, this had its effect on teachers' morale and enthusiasm for the work.

4.4. Leadership and management

Five teachers mentioned that a supportive and understanding Principal, with a "nurturing" style, will have a great effect on the enthusiasm and dedication of his staff. By the same token, a Principal who is demanding and fussy, autocratic, and preoccupied with ticking the boxes required on government appraisal forms, rather than with the longer term aspects of education as a whole, will have a corresponding negative effect on his staff. Some principals feels themselves to be under pressure from the government to improve their own personal appraisal scores, and transfer this into pressure on the staff to increase the amount of administration work that they do, and to concentrate narrowly on the scoring of points.

4.5. Social change

The falling birth rate in Taiwan had led to a fall in the overall number of students applying for education at all levels. Nine out of the twelve teachers said that this was a cause of concern. This in turn has led to an anxiety that some schools may be seen as overstaffed, as some classes or departments might have to close due to lack of sufficient applicants. Consequently there were understandable worries about future redundancies.

Combined with this, the falling birth rate had led to a change in parental attitudes towards their only child, who became their little treasure. Parents had more demands, and greater expectations, which were not always realistic. Yet they would bring pressure onto teachers, and if they felt dissatisfied would engage the help of counsellors or advocates, to speak and agitate on their behalf. This has led to excessive time being spent by school principals, in fostering good public relations.

4.6. Globalisation

Some teachers said that children from mixed marriages present more of a challenge for teachers because they come from a variety of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. And also the mothers may have more difficulty in helping with homework in an unfamiliar language.

Nonetheless, with the increasing necessity of acquiring fluency in English language at an early age, demands for English teaching have increased. When previously English was taught to all students starting at Junior High level, now there are demands to begin English teaching earlier. This means that more qualified teachers of English will be required. It is especially difficult to recruit an English teacher in the small schools in remote rural areas.

5. Conclusion

Government policy should reflect the different requirements in education due to the falling birth rate, and higher expectations of parents, and manage expectations realistically. In order to improve the school services, the authority should pay special attention to particular needs of teachers of the small schools in remote areas who work under difficult conditions which make it more difficult to achieve government targets. Finally the society should show respect for front line teachers, and trust them to use their own best professional judgment in classroom situations as they arise, and also to prepare individual students in the direction suitable for them.

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